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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

1 July 1985

Cambodia: Rainy Season Update

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Summary

As the rainy season in Cambodia moves into its third month, Vietnamese forces are moving aggressively to counter efforts by the non-Communist resistance--the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) and Prince Sihanouk's National Army (ANS)--to extend guerrilla operations in the interior. Hanoi's heavy emphasis on "sealing" the Thai-Cambodia border, however, has given the more resilient Communist Democratic Kampuchean (DK) forces under Pol Pot enough breathing room to sustain an active campaign in the provinces. Our preliminary analysis of resistance efforts suggests that this pattern of performance will prevail through the rest of the rainy season and that Vietnam's dominant military position will remain unchanged.

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This memorandum was prepared by Southeast Asia Division, Office of East Asian Analysis. Information available as of 1 July 1985 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and should be addressed to Chief, Southeast Asia Division, OEA

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The Non-Communist Resistance: Slow Off The Mark

The toughened Vietnamese strategy has strongly tested the ability of the KPNLF and ANS to carry guerrilla warfare to the Cambodian interior. The KPNLF, in particular, has made little headway in the face of Vietnam's aggressive patrol and sweep operations.

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Infiltration efforts resumed in mid-June as Vietnamese sweeps temporarily abated, but KPNLF operations will probably not go unchallenged for long.

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The KPNLF's weak leadership and loose command structure have continued to impede development of an effective guerrilla program. Son Sann's reluctant agreement in early May to yield his military responsibilities as commander-in-chief to Major General Sak Sutsakhan removed a major element of contention within the Front, but Sak's frequent hospitalizations have hampered his ability to exert his authority. The ill-advised resistance by Chea Chhut's garrison at Prey Chan to sustained Vietnamese attacks in April dramatized the continuing lack of strong central direction within the KPNLF leadership. Many of the Prey Chan troops subsequently deserted and the base was abandoned by late May. Although many of these troops have recently regrouped at a new location near Bak Ronaos, morale and discipline problems persist there as well as in other KPNLF units.

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Sihanouk's forces, in contrast, have rebounded surprisingly from the loss of their base at Ta Tum. Since March, the ANS has mapped out a methodical plan for expanding its operations into Siemreab-Otdar Meanchey Province as far south as the Tonle Sap. Although we cannot verify ANS claims of having moved as many as 5,000 troops into the interior in recent months, they have mounted several major operations designed to establish some of the contacts with local residents required for a long-term guerrilla effort.

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Increased Vietnamese sweep operations and population control measures since mid-May have forced some retrenchment in ANS interior operations. Vietnamese patrols against ANS positions have also disrupted their operations and prompted the evacuation of civilian dependents from Green Hill in early June.

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The DK Interior Campaign

Vietnamese forces are also maintaining heavy pressure against most DK bases [redacted], and guerrilla supply links from the border remain tenuous. But Hanoi's preoccupation with border operations has provided an opportunity for DK forces to carry out an active guerrilla campaign throughout much of the Cambodian interior since January. The DK has sought to demonstrate that Vietnam's offensive, rather than destroying the resistance, only shifted the war to the interior.

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[redacted] Satellite photography since January also shows construction of a defensive berm around Siemreab town and similar protective measures have been noted at several military installations. We believe most of these construction activities are long-planned projects designed to curb guerrilla access to important population centers and military installations rather than short-term reactions to worsened security conditions created by recent DK operations.

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The bulk of Vietnamese combat power remains committed against resistance forces and infiltration routes near the Thai border, indicating that the Vietnamese do not at this time regard the DK operations in the interior as sufficiently serious to commit additional resources to deal with them. Although the DK activity cannot be measured precisely, we believe it is not up to the levels of 1983, which so far stands as the best DK performance. An indicator that the Vietnamese have revised their assessment of the DK threat would be the deployment of additional combat units from Vietnam; for example, elements of the two divisions that temporarily deployed to Cambodia earlier this year for the dry season border campaign. [redacted]

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Outlook For The Rainy Season: Tightening the Lid

Hanoi appears intent on maintaining heavy military pressure to frustrate resistance plans for increased operations in the border area during the rainy season. The pattern of sweep operations and crossborder intrusions in areas of resistance activity that has emerged since February will probably continue and will involve occasional sharp encounters with Thai units as well.* An important political motivation for Hanoi is to deny the resistance any identifiable territorial holdings inside Cambodia, a point it could then exploit during debates at non-aligned and United Nations meetings later this year. Beyond immediate tactical and political benefits, Hanoi seems to believe that unrelenting military pressure at this stage is a necessary part of its overall strategy of convincing the resistance and its backers that their cause is hopeless. [REDACTED]

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We believe the non-Communist resistance will make little progress during this rainy season toward meeting even their own modest goals for establishing the necessary groundwork inside Cambodia for sustained guerrilla operations. The absence of a functioning support base in the interior and Vietnam's aggressive strategy, in our judgment, will limit their operations to relatively shallow zones. Lack of appreciable progress this year is likely, in turn, to render prospects for future headway more remote. On the other hand, Communist DK guerrillas will probably be able to sustain their activity over the next several months and have the potential to score occasional highly visible successes. But their actions are not likely to alter significantly the strategic advantages Vietnam has acquired over the past year. [REDACTED]

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*Vietnamese occupation of hilltop positions [REDACTED] during attacks on DK guerrilla forces in April, for example, sparked periodic heavy fighting [REDACTED] over a two-week period in May. [REDACTED]

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